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ABSTRACT

Four realizations of the copula occur in English, two in both Anglo and Black English and two in Black English and in some varieties of Anglo English but not in standard English. This paper describes the use of the copula in English and identifies the phonological, syntactic, and semantic factors which are believed to condition its realization in Anglo and Black English. (Author/JM)

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LINGUISTIC FACTORS IN THE REALIZATION OF THE COPULA: SUGGESTIONS FOR INVESTIGATION IN BLACK ENGLISH

Carol W. Pfaff

REALIZATIONS OF THE COPULA

There are four realizations of the copula which occur in English. The first two of these occur both in Anglo and Black English; the latter two do not occur in standard English but are common in Black English and may also occur in some varieties of Anglo English.

1. Full Forms: am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been,
   e.g., He is sick.
2. Contracted Forms: 'm, 're, 's,[1] e.g., He's sick.
3. Zero, e.g., He sick.
4. Unconjugated be, e.g., He be sick.

LINGUISTIC FACTORS WHICH CONDITION REALIZATION OF THE COPULA

The four realizations of the copula in Black English have been shown not to be random variants (Labov et al., 1968; Legum et al., 1971; Pfaff, 1971a), and the two standard realizations seem to be conditioned by snytax and phonology as in Anglo English (Pfaff, 1971a), yet it is still unclear just which linguistic factors[2] condition the two nonstandard realizations.

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[1]These forms may be syllabic under certain conditions of stress as described in Zwicky (1969).

[2]In Black English, as in any language, some of the factors which condition the realization of linguistic variables are themselves extra-linguistic. The most important of these are social factors such as formality of speech situation, prestige, and solidarity of addressor and addressee, i.e., speakers and hearers have value judgements about the connotations of the several potential realizations. This paper is limited to enumeration and discussion of the linguistic factors which may condition the realizations. The investigation of the social factors is carried by manipulation of the elicitation context. See Berdan (In preparation).

A prerequisite for planning a study of the nonstandard realizations of the copula using an elicitation technique such as story-retelling, in which linguistic factors are controlled in the input (Pfaff, 1971b), is an explicit statement of the uses of the verb be in English and some of the linguistic factors which play a role in determining the grammaticality of sentences in which it is used. This paper is intended to perform that function.

The discussion of linguistic factors may be divided into three major categories: phonological, syntactic, and semantic, although it must be remembered that these are actually interrelated in important ways.

PHONOLOGICAL FACTORS

One of the nonstandard realizations of the copula, the zero realization, can be regarded as a consonant deletion or consonant cluster simplification, i.e., is or 's → ∅ is equivalent to /z/ → [∅] (final dental sibilant deletion); are or 're → ∅ is equivalent to /r/ → $\left\{\begin{matrix}\text{ə}\\ \emptyset\end{matrix}\right\}$ (r vocalization).

ADJACENT PHONOLOGICAL SEGMENTS

Previous studies comparing deletion of the copula and other grammatical categories from the phonological point of view indicate that deletion of the copula, in contrast to other consonant deletions, is not primarily conditioned by whether or not the adjacent phonological segments are vowels or consonants (Labov et al., 1968; Pfaff, 1971a).

STRESS

Stress, a phonological feature which has been shown to correlate with contraction of the copula in standard and Black English and zero realization in Black English, is itself a reflection of conditions which are essentially syntactic. If the copula is "exposed" by any grammatical transformation, it cannot be unstressed and thus cannot be phonologically contracted. For example, in the following comparative sentence, the first but not the second occurrence of is can be contracted:

Bill is taller than Mary is.

SYNTACTIC FACTORS

The syntactic factors which may condition realization of the copula may be divided into three categories:

1. Those which pertain to the copula phrase itself, e.g.,
   (a) tense: present vs. past
   (b) aspect: perfective or progressive vs. simple present or past
   (c) voice: active vs. passive.
2. Those which pertain to adjacent parts of the sentence, e.g.,
   (a) syntactic category which precedes the copula: whether the surface subject is a noun or pronoun
   (b) person and number of the surface subject
   (c) syntactic category which follows the copula: noun phrase verb phrase, adjective phrase, prepositional phrase.
3. Those which pertain to the function of the copula in the sentence as a whole, e.g.,

(a) auxiliary

(b) equational

(c) existential

COPULA PHRASE

Tense

One of the initial hypothesis is that zero and unconjugated realizations of the copula occur only in place of standard English present tense finite forms, _am_, _are_, and _is_, and not past tense forms _was_ and _were_. Legum _et al_. (1971) report that, except for nonstandard person and number agreement, 100% of copulas identified as _was_ and _were_ in a corpus of free casual conversation of young Black children were identical to standard English forms. This syntactic co-occurence, if confirmed, may ultimately be found to be related to the semantics of the extended use of the present tense for future and past events in standard and Black English.

Aspect

Whether _be_ occurs in a conjugated (finite) or unconjugated form is partly determined by aspect. In the perfective and progressive aspects, _be_ as a main verb or as any but the first auxiliary[3] occurs as the unconjugated forms, _been_ and _being_, respectively, while in the simple present and simple past, _be_ occurs as the conjugated forms _am_, _are_, _is_, _was_, _were_. Nonstandard realizations of _be_ in Black English are evident only for the conjugated forms.

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[3]The distinction between auxiliary and main verb functions of _be_ is discussed further below, pp. 14-15

Voice

English sentences with transitive verbs can occur in either active or passive voice, e.g., The lion ate the lamb; The lamb was eaten (by the lion); The lamb got eaten (by the lion); The first of these passive constructions is formed with be. Previous studies of Black English have shown that none of the realizations of be occurs in the passive, but rather that the passive construction with be is avoided altogether in favor of the passive using got. In the study of Los Angeles Black children's speech by Legum et al. (1971) only 12 sentences in a corpus of 25,794 words were identified as passives and of these all used got rather than a form of be. Further, all of these sentences were agentless. Bates (1968) has shown that this preference for the got-passive is characteristic of Anglo children as well. These facts suggest that the passive construction is not a particularly fruitful one for investigation of the conditioning factors in nonstandard copula realizations, although, the use of got vs. be passive is itself a significant question requiring further study.[4]

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[4]Got passives in Anglo English seem to be associated with more casual styles. There may also be distinct linguistic presuppositions associated with the different passive constructions. Turner and Rommetveit (1967) found got-passives elicited significantly more frequently in response to questions of the type, "What happened to the object" while be-passives were elicited in response to questions of the type "What is being done to the object."

ADJACENT SENTENCE PARTS

Syntactic Category of Subject

Previous studies have found that zero realization of *is* is correlated with syntactic category of the subject. Personal pronoun subjects, *he*, *she*, are more frequently followed by zero realizations than are noun subjects, e.g., *the boy*, or any other type of pronoun, *it*, *who*, etc. (Labov *et al.*, 1968; Pfaff, 1971a). Pfaff suggests this may be explained in terms of a semantic constraint against a structural ambiguity reflected in derivational constraints in grammars (Pfaff, 1971a).

Person and Number of Subject

Person and number of the surface subject condition the form of conjugated *be* in standard English, e.g., I *am*; you *are*; he, she, it *is*; etc. There is, however, no evidence that nonstandard realizations of *be* in Black English are conditioned by this factor. Unconjugated *be* and zero realizations have been found to occur with all persons in both singular and plural.

Syntactic Category which Follows Copula

There is some indication that the syntactic category which follows the copula in the surface structure of a sentence correlates with the frequency of particular standard and nonstandard realizations. Zero realizations are found to be relatively frequent before progressives

and noun phrases (Labov et al., 1968; Pfaff, 1971a). Pfaff (1971a) suggests that both preceding and following syntactic category are jointly significant in terms of semantic constraints.

The syntactic categories which follow the copula are given in Table 1. These categories have a regular correspondence with the functions of be in the sentence. It is believed that the functional approach, described in the next section, will prove to be more revealing than syntactic category per se.

FUNCTION

The verb be in standard English functions in three syntactic environments which may be termed auxiliary, equational, and existential.

TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS OF SYNTACTIC CATEGORY WHICH FOLLOWS COPULA WITH FUNCTION OF COPULA IN SENTENCE

Syntactic Category Which Follows Copula	Function of Copula
(adverb) verb-ing	auxiliary
(adverb) verb-en	auxiliary
prepositional phrase	equational
adjective phrase	equational
pronoun	equational
noun phrase	existential

Auxiliary

Forms of be occur as surface auxiliaries in sentences in progressive tense or passive voice, i.e., a form of be occurs in addition to the verb which expresses the main semantic predication of the sentence.[5] The copula form is conjugated (am, are, is, was, were), in the simple present and past progressives and passives, but invariably been in the perfect progressives and passives. Progressives do not occur with all verbs for which simple present and past tense forms are grammatical. The distinction between stative and nonstative (sometimes called active) verbs plays a crucial role in determining which verbs may have progressive forms (Lakoff, 1965). Nonstative verbs occur in the progressive while statives do not. Walk in examples 1 and 2 in Table 2 is nonstative, while know in examples 3 and 4 is stative. Both stative and nonstative verbs can occur in the passive (e.g., 8 and 9).

In more complex tenses such as in sentences 12 and 13, only one form is conjugated, the left-most auxiliary in the surface structure of the sentence. If both have and be occur as auxiliaries, the form of have is always left-most, i.e., no conjugated forms of be occur in perfective progressives (5, 6, 13), or in perfective passives (10, 11, 13). Nonperfective progressives and passives, illustrated in Table 2, (examples 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 12) are thus the appropriate sentences for eliciting conjugated auxiliary be forms.

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[5]It is important to distinguish the auxiliary usage of the verb be as a marker tense or voice discussed here from auxiliary as a class of verbs, defined by certain syntactic properties, e.g., Twaddell (1965) and Palmer (1965). The relationship between these two notions of auxiliary is discussed further below, pages 14-15.

TABLE 2

AUXILIARY USE OF BE

	Example Sentences	Aspect/Voice	Conjugated (C) or Unconjugated (U) Form of BE
1.	The boy is walking. (nonstative)	present progressive	C
2.	The boy was walking. (nonstative)	past progressive	C
3.	*John is knowing Bill. (stative)[1]		
4.	*John was knowing Bill. (stative)		
5.	The boy has been walking.	present perfect progressive	U
6.	The boy had been walking.	past perfect progressive	U
7.	The boy is hit by the ball.	present passive	C
8.	The boy was hit by the ball. (nonstative)	past passive	C
9.	The fact was known by all. (stative)	past passive	C
10.	The boy has been hit by the ball.	present perfect passive	U
11.	The boy had been hit by the ball.	past perfect passive	U
12.	The boy was being hit by the ball.	past progressive passive	C
13.	The boy had been being hit by the ball.	past perfect progressive passive	U

[1] "*" indicates that the sentence is ungrammatical.

Equational

In the second type of usage, forms of be occur as the main semantic predication of an equational sentence. There are several semantic subcategories of equational sentences; including identity, class membership, and attribution of a property (Ferguson, 1971) Another subcategory is specification of location. These subcategories can be identified in terms of syntactic features of the predicate complement as indicated in Table 3, (14, 15, 16, 19).

In contrast to their role in the auxiliary use, a conjugated form of be is the only verb in the sentence in the simple present and past tenses of equational sentences. As is the case with auxiliary usage, the form in perfect tenses is invariantly been (17, 18). In progressive tenses, the invariant form being occurs preceded by one of the conjugated forms of be as an auxiliary (20). Not all types of equationals can occur in progressive tenses, only those for which the predicate complement is nonstative (Lakoff, 1965). In such cases, the verb be has the semantic force of 'act as,' (20) There are no passives of equational sentences, (22, 23).

Existential

A third use of the copula is in existential sentences. The form of be is invariantly preceded by the word there and followed by a noun phrase which is the semantic subject of the sentence. In the simple present and past tenses third person conjugated forms occur (Table 4, 24, 25). The form is invariantly been in perfect tenses (26, 27). Progressives and passives of existential sentences do not occur (28, 29).

TABLE 3

EQUATIONAL USE OF BE

Example Sentence	Semantics	Syntax of Predicate Complement	Tense/Aspect/Voice
14. He was the shortstop.	identity	definite noun	past
15. You are a teacher.	class membership	indefinite noun	present
16. He is tall.	attribution of a property	adjective[1]	present
17. He has been the chairman before.	identity	definite noun	present perfect
18. He had been short.	attribution of a property	adjective, stative	past perfect
19. He is in the park.	location	prepositional phrase[2]	present
20. He was being good.	act as property	adjective, nonstative	past progressive
21. *He's being tall.		adjective, stative	present progressive
22. *Tall was been by him.		adjective, stative	past passive
23. *The shortstop was been by me.		noun, stative	past passive

[1]In certain idioms, a noun phrase functions as a property attribute, e.g., you are a big boy can mean 'you are mature.'

[2]In certain idioms, prepositional phrases which can occur after a copula do not specify location, but are equivalent to adjective, attributing a property to the subject. A few examples are:

He is { in trouble / over the hill / under the weather / past his prime / in a quandry } .

One other example, He is on time, is apparently in a different subclass of expressions, which also includes early and late.

TABLE 4

EXISTENTIAL USE OF BE

Example Sentences	Tense/Aspect/Voice
24. There is/was snow on the ground today.	present/past
25. There are/were clouds in the sky today.	present/past
26. There has/had been snow on the ground.	present/past perfect
27. There have/had been clouds in the sky.	present/past perfect
28. *There were being clouds in the sky.	past progressive
29. *Snow is on the ground today by there.	present passive

Auxiliaries and Main Verbs

As mentioned above (footnote 3, page 5 and footnote 5, page 9), the term auxiliary has been used in traditional grammars to refer to a much wider class of verbal elements than that discussed in this paper. The auxiliary be is only one member of this class which includes have, has, and had as markers of the perfectives, the modals may, can, should, etc., as well as the forms of be. Auxiliaries in this sense are characterized by their occurrence or change in position under four grammatical transformations: (1) yes/no question, (2) negative, (3) tag question, and (4) emphasis. In contrast to auxiliaries there is the class of main verbs, which do not have these properties of occurrence, but require the insertion of do as the "dummy auxiliary." Table 5 illustrates the syntactic properties of auxiliaries. Note that all three uses of be in standard English are auxiliaries with respect to their occurrence in these constructions.

Occurrence of Nonstandard *Be* Realization

The nonstandard zero and unconjugated realizations of be in Black English occur in both auxiliary and equational uses of the copula (see Table 6).

Labov has found that zero realizations of be occurred frequently with progressive (Labov et al., 1968). Henrie (1969), in a story-retelling study of kindergarteners found zero realizations correlated with nonstative. As mentioned above (p. 9), only nonstative verbs occur in the progressive, so these results are quite similar.

TABLE 5

POSITION OF AUXILIARIES AND MAIN VERBS IN FOUR GRAMMATICAL TRANSFORMATIONS

		Affirmative	Yes/No Question	Negative	Tag Question	Emphasis
30.	auxiliary <u>be</u>	John is going.	Is John going?	John isn't going.	John is going, isn't he?	John <u>is</u> going.
31.	equational <u>be</u>	John is tall.	Is John tall?	John isn't tall.	John is tall, isn't he.	John <u>is</u> tall.
32.	existential <u>be</u>	There is snow on the ground.	Is there snow on the ground?	There isn't snow on the ground.	There is snow on the ground, isn't there?	There <u>is</u> snow on the ground.
33.	<u>have</u>	John has gone.	Has John gone?	John hasn't gone.	John has gone, hasn't he?	John <u>has</u> gone.
34.	modal	John can win.	Can John win?	John can't win.	John can win, can't he?	John <u>can</u> win.
35.	main verb	John runs fast.	*Runs John fast?	*John runsn't fast.	*John runs fast, runsn't he?	*John <u>runs</u> fast.[1]
36.			Does John run fast?	John doesn't run fast.	John runs fast, doesn't he?	John <u>does</u> run fast.

[1]This sentence is ungrammatical in the intended sense in which the entire proposition expressed by the sentence is emphasized, although it is grammatical as an instance of contrastive stress, where there is the presupposition that John is not fast at some other activity.

TABLE 6

NONSTANDARD USAGE OF BE

Function	Zero	Unconjugated be
auxiliary	Ejuan always messing with something. (Pfaff, 1971)	They be watching a western. (Legum et al., 1971)
equational	I know you bad. (Anderson, 1970)	Sometimes I be a leader. (Legum et al., 1971)

Lakoff (1971), has pointed out three verbs which are exceptions to the restriction of progressive to nonstatives. These will provide crucial lexical items for distinguishing the effect of stativity from that of progressivity in conditioning the zero realization of the copula in Black English.

The verbs, except, hope, and anticipate are stative, but may occur in the following examples:

I { expect / am expecting } Schwartz' wife to run off with the butcher.

I { hope / am hoping } that my date will turn out not to have warts.

We { anticipate / are anticipating } that there will be a great advance in pornolinguistics.

Lakoff points out that:

> These verbs have the property that the sentence in the object complement is not now true, but is possible relative to the beliefs of the subject of the verb. Verbs with this property may optionally take the progressive auxiliary. Thus, there is an overt syntactic correlate of this interesting semantic property.
>
> (Lakoff, 1971, p. 335)

The existential use of be also has nonstandard realization in Black English, but these are not characteristically the zero and unconjugated be forms. It is, they, they have, they got, there go, and here go, are the forms reported to occur in existential sentences (Labov et al., 1968). This class of sentences can therefore be excluded from initial investigations of the conditioning factors on nonstandard be realization.

An important and interesting feature of Black English copula usage which requires further study is that the unconjugated be realization appears to have the characteristics of a main verb rather than an auxiliary. In negatives and emphasis, the paradigm for unconjugated be is apparently that of (36) rather than (30-34) of Table 5, that is the dummy auxiliary do occurs in these transformations.

37. So you know it all don't be on her, it be half on me and half on her. (Labov et al., 1968)

38. When he do be around here. (ibid.)

SEMANTIC FACTORS

The semantics of the copula in Black English has been one of the most interesting unsolved problems of the dialect. Two aspects of the problem can be distinguished:

1) How many meaning contrasts are overtly represented in the copula system of Black English as opposed to Anglo English?
2) What are the meanings associated with the standard and nonstandard forms of the copula in Black English?

With respect to the first of these questions, some researchers suggest that both nonstandard realizations of the copula, unconjugated be and zero, represent meanings distinct from full and contracted forms (Loflin, 1969; Henrie, 1969). Other researchers suggest that only the unconjugated be form carries distinctly different meaning, while the zero form is a phonologically and/or syntactically conditioned variant of the conjugated forms of the copula (Labov, 1969).

One of the difficulties of investigating this problem and of interpreting the results of previous investigations is that the available descriptions of Anglo English with which Black English is compared, have purposely avoided discussing semantics. Thus, many semantic characteristics discovered to be true for Black English seemed to have no counterpart in Anglo English. Within the last five years, however, this situation has begun to change, and semantics per se and the interactions between semantics and syntax and between semantics and phonology have been the focus of a growing number of linguists. Investigations into the semantics of tense and aspect have been begun (Ross, 1969; McCawley, 1971; Fillmore, 1971; Macaulay, 1971), and the results of these investigations can be expected to shed considerable light on the relationship of Black and Anglo English copula semantics.[6]

With respect to the second position, that of the specific meanings associated with the the realizations of the copula in Black English, no set of one-to-one meaning-realization relationships has yet been

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[6]Recent work in the area of semantics of tense and aspect in English is reviewed in Pfaff (in preparation).

discovered. However, most researchers agree that one or more of the following play a role in the semantics of unconjugated be:

habitual	repeated	a-temporal
permanent	hypothetical	continuous

There are numerous counterexamples, however, showing that these meanings are not exclusively associated with unconjugated be, but may occur with zero realization as well, e.g.,

I know you bad, cause you always bad. (Anderson, 1970)

Ejuan always messing with something. (Pfaff, 1971a)

There is less agreement about the meaning of the conjugated and zero forms, for example Griffin (1971), has proposed a three-way distinction:

conjugated be 'permanent quality'

zero 'temporary'

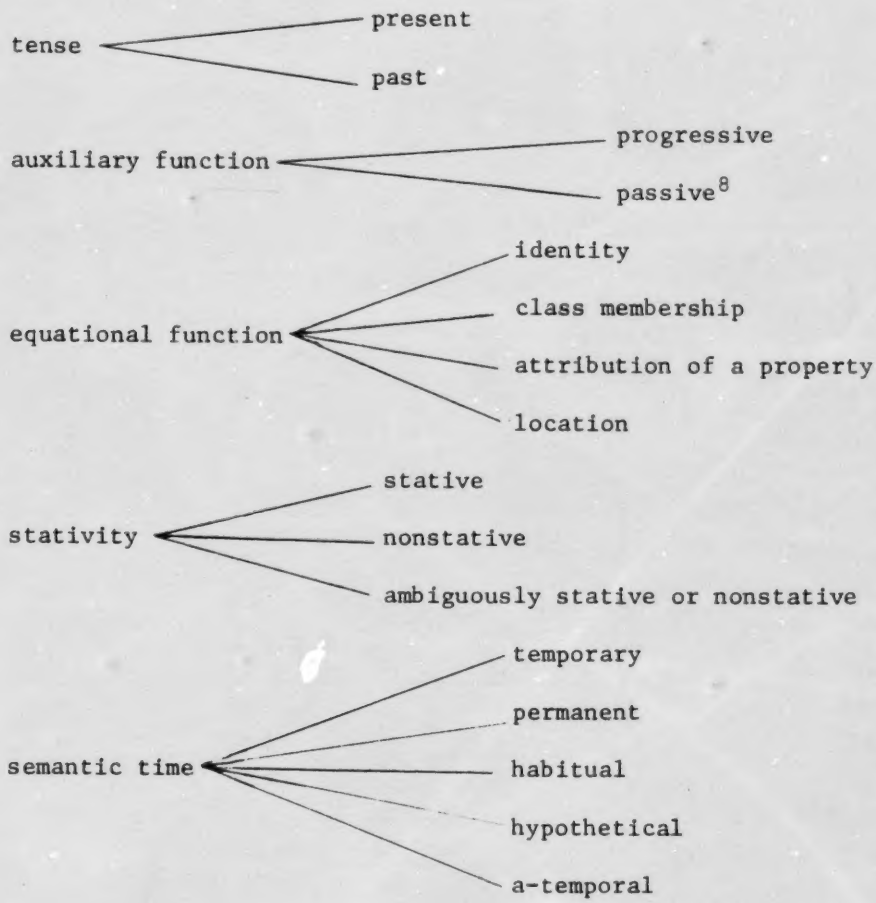
unconjugated be 'habitual, continuous action observable by speaker'

Henrie (1969) found that in a story-retelling task, kindergarten children's use of zero forms correlated significantly with 'short' actions, and also with present progressive tense. These apparently contradictory meanings may be reconcilable when syntax is taken into account. Griffin's proposal primarily concerns equational use of be, while Henrie's proposal concerns auxiliary usage.

A third aspect of the semantic problem is the investigation of the hypothesis suggested by Pfaff (1971a) that derivational constraints against potentially ambiguous sentences are a conditioning factor on the distribution of zero realization. This aspect is discussed under syntax (pp. 7-8 above).

IMPLICATIONS FOR STORY-RETELLING ELICITATION

Of the linguistic factors discussed above, the following are suggested for use in investigations of nonstandard realizations of the copula in Black English.[7]



[7]As, for example, in the sample story given in Pfaff (1971b).

[8]See above, page 6.

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